

THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETICAL BOOKS

In our English Bibles, these books are the fourth and last section of the Old Testament. The four sections are:

- 1) The Law -- five books.
- 2) History -- ~~twelve~~ books.
- 3) Poetry -- five books.
- 4) Prophecy -- seventeen books.

The seventeen prophetic books are generally divided into two groups: the major prophets, and the minor prophets, not because of their importance, but because of their size.

The major prophets are: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

The minor prophets are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

While we cannot fix the dates of each book exactly, yet we can say that it seems accurate that they wrote from about 837 to 425 B.C. Joel was probably the first, and Malachi, the last. The biggest question seems to be over the date of Obadiah. Some (like K & D) put it very early; others (like Scroggie) put it late (just before Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).

The Jews divided the books differently. They had three divisions:

- 1) The Torah, or Law, with 5 books.
- 2) The Nebi'im, or Prophets, with 21 books.
- 3) The Kethubim, or Writings, with 13 books.

They divided the Prophets into the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets:

- 1) The Former Prophets:

Joshua

Judges

1 and 2 Samuel

1 and 2 Kings

- 2) The Latter Prophets: 15 books. They included all of the books that we would include as prophetic books except for Lamentations and Daniel which they put in their third section, the Kethubim.

To the Jews the prophets were primarily forthtellers, and to a lesser degree, foretellers of the future. That is why they did not consider Daniel a prophet, because he was not a preacher.

What we need to do as we begin our study of the prophets, and of Isaiah in particular, is to familiarize ourselves with the ministry of the prophets. Who were they, and what was their place in the plan and purpose of God? We are concerned now with the writing prophets in contrast with men like Elijah and Elisha who were non-writing prophets.

Who were the prophets?

- 1) They were God's emergency men. They were men raised up by God in times of special need.
- 2) As I have said, they were primarily preachers. The predictive nature of their work was not the main feature, although it played a large part in their ministry. But we must think of them as preachers, declaring the Word of God.
- 3) They were men who were not only directed by God to speak, to preach, but also to write. Their messages have been preserved for us.
- 4) In connection with their writing, we can also say that they wrote under the direction of the Spirit of God. Thus, their written works which we have in the Bible are a part of the total revelation of God which go to make up the

Holy Scriptures.

In their preaching, and writing, what did they do? Note what Paul said in 2 Tim. 3:16, 17. (Read from v. 14.)

The books themselves reveal the following ministries:

1) Rebuke and Warning.

They rebuke people for their sins and warned them of the consequences of continued disobedience to God. One writer says that "more than half" of the prophetic books falls into this category. Cf. Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. IV, p. 896.

Predictions of judgment occupied a large place in their writings.

2) Guidance, correction, the action that they were to take if judgment were to be averted.

Here we see the prophets calling people to turn to God, to repent of their sins, to change their way of living, and to learn about God and His will.

3) Encouragement. This came in many ways, chiefly by

- a) Additional revelations of God, or the repetition of truths about God which had been given before. There is much about God as the Creator. His various attributes are emphasized.
- b) The promises of God.
- c) The Messianic hope. Cf. 1 Pet. 1:10, 11. Some have to do with the Lord's first coming; others have to do with His second coming.
- d) The unchanging purpose of God for His people

What kind of men were the prophets? Cf. Matthew Henry's comments at the beginning of Vol. IV of his commentary.

- 1) They were men assured of their calling.
- 2) They were true men of God, holy men.
- 3) They were persecuted men.
- 4) They were faithful men. They persevered in spite of the opposition. Cf. Jeremiah.
- 5) They were honored men, men honored by God Who stood with them.
- 6) They were men concerned with the Glory of God, with the will of God, then, and for time and eternity to come.
- 7) They were men with one immediate purpose. Cf. Matthew Henry's words:

. . . they all aimed at one and the same thing, which was to bring people to repent of their sins and to return to God and to do their duty to him. This was the errand on which all God's messengers were sent, to beat down sin, and to revive and advance serious piety. The burden of every song was, Turn you now every one from his evil way; amend your ways and your doings, and execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, Jer. vii. 3, 5. See Zech. vii. 8, 9; viii. 16. The scope and design of all their prophecies were to enforce the precepts and sanctions of the law of Moses, the moral law, which is of universal and perpetual obligation. Here is nothing of the ceremonial institutes, of the carnal ordinances that were imposed only till the times of reformation, Heb. ix. 10. Those were now waxing old and ready to vanish away; but they make it their business to press the great and weighty matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and truth (Vol. IV, p. x).

Obviously, from 2 Tim. 3:16, 17, we, too, are meant to profit from the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. They do have a much-needed message for the Church today. Perhaps one reason for the low level of spiritual life among the Lord's people today is because we have neglected the reading and study of the prophets.